

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: June 9, 2008

Published in Print: June 11, 2008

COMMENTARY

The Impending Death of Face-to-Face Instruction

Notes From a Neo-Luddite

By William J. Price

For those readers who may have only a dim recollection of their study of European history, Luddites (named for their leader, Ned Ludd) were members of a social movement of English textile workers in the Midlands of England in the early 1800s. Their notoriety occurred as a result of their opposition, often violent, to changes being produced by the Industrial Revolution, which they felt threatened their livelihood and way of life. Industries were being dramatically altered by new mechanization and organization, fundamentally changing society. In protest, the Luddites smashed machinery, acting against factory owners who marginalized workers.

While scholars of this period differ in their characterizations of the Luddites' motivations, many conclude that they were not against machines and technology generally, but rather were fighting against the planned obsolescence of an entire class of artisans, forever changing life as they knew it.

I describe this phenomenon because, in my world of work, I am viewed by colleagues as a Neo-Luddite. As a professor of education in a large graduate program at a Midwestern university, I do not, unlike nearly everyone else on our faculty, teach online courses. I have quietly avoided giving up face-to-face instruction, despite a veritable tsunami of Internet-based instructional designs sweeping across America's educational institutions.

Schools at all levels are racing toward this profound transformation in learning. Community colleges, in particular, are investing heavily in the delivery of their curricula online. In secondary schools, online instruction is no longer offered only to top-achieving students, but is increasingly an expectation for all students. In my own home state of Michigan, an online course experience is now a graduation requirement for every high school student.

One survey has suggested that online learning in higher education grew at an average annual rate of almost 22 percent from 2002 to 2006, with an estimated total of 3.5 million students having taken at least one online course in the fall of 2006. Faculty members in many institutions, including my own, are busy incorporating Web-based instruction and applying sophisticated systems that combine text and pictures, sound and motion, as well as two-way image and voice communication to create a virtual classroom experience for students wherever they might be at whatever time they feel like tuning in.

[← Back to Story](#)edweek.org edweek.org/go/blogs

The sharpest education insights from Education Week staff

- › No Child Left Behind
 - › English-Language Learners
 - › Campaign '08
 - › Special Education
 - › School Law
- [› Click here for blogs](#)

In education, arguably one of the most human of professions, there are already places where we are preparing students in isolation, connected only by computers.

Most of my colleagues are spending countless hours every day in front of computer screens, and become absolutely giddy after announcing proudly that they have placed their entire course content and teaching repertoire on the Web, and have therefore eliminated the need for direct person-to-person, face-to-face contact with students.

Although I have not joined them in their obsession with technology, I do not consider myself a technophobe. I do appreciate the many incredible applications that computers and the Internet can provide for us in our lives. I am, rather, as the writer Marc Prensky phrased it in his wonderfully descriptive essay "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," a digital immigrant. I simply confront a digital world late in my life. As I approach my 70th year, I find myself in a state of dissonance with the digital language and culture that now surrounds me.

My resistance to adapting to online instruction for pedagogical and philosophical reasons is, I suspect, discounted by some colleagues as simply an excuse for failure to learn to use technology in my teaching. But, in truth, I have profound misgivings about the loss of a human face in learning.

I find little serious discussion around what might be lost in our digital transformation, particularly as it relates to students. In education, arguably one of the most human of professions, there are already places where we are preparing students in isolation, connected only by computers. Consider that many universities are now offering complete graduate degrees online, courses in which students never meet face to face with their professors or with each other. Through the use of live streaming video of graduation ceremonies ("gradcasts"), we have even made it unnecessary for families and friends to attend the social celebration of this significant life achievement.

As I watch students numbly walking across campus plugged into iPods or talking on cellphones, oblivious to each other and their immediate surroundings, I am deeply concerned about the kind of human community we are creating. As the late media critic Neil Postman so insightfully reminded us, digital communication and media "privatize" us, isolating the individual and diminishing community. Computer technologies, he argued, only simulate community, and instead produce a pervasive disconnectedness among people.

As a keen observer of contemporary technologies' effects on our culture, Postman often posed telling questions. What, he asked, is the problem for which technology is the answer? Are there ill effects? Must we accept all technological advances uncritically? Ultimately, Postman was asking us what meanings and what types of culture we are allowing technologies to create for us.

Too often, the traditional socialization roles of advising, nurturing, and mentoring students have been reduced to a series of e-mails.

This question is especially profound when one examines the future of the bricks-and-mortar educational institution as technology becomes the primary modality for teaching and learning. How can we continue to justify the cost for students to attend a residential university, for example, to live in campus housing, only to take their coursework online while sitting alone in their dorm rooms? Too often, the traditional socialization roles of advising, nurturing, and mentoring students have been reduced to a series of e-mails. Through the use of technology, the faculty culture in many institutions has become one of absentia, in which instructors increasingly are absent from the workplace but connected by technology—arguably still available to students and colleagues, but in a different medium.

These examples, as well as other evidence of cultural changes driven by our digital transformation, remind us that technology was supposed to connect us, but instead has fostered a kind of social

isolation. Perhaps most important were Postman's pleas for the reassertion of human over technological values, a thought that should give us pause as technology overwhelms us.

There also seems to be little discourse on the ethical and moral dimensions of technology use—for both students and teachers. The posting of student work and instructors' critiques of that work on the Internet through online teaching puts the confidentiality of student learning potentially at risk. The expectation of privacy in student-teacher relationships that has allowed for experiments in thought and self-disclosures with a minimum of risk is now fraught with potential abuse through digital access by others.

To be fair, there are those instructors who insist that they can do everything online that they previously could do face to face, and perhaps better. Whether this is true or not is debatable, but it is not the issue that gives rise to my concerns. Rather, what I fear is that, with the lessening role of face-to-face instruction, we may diminish our ability to help students forge a social consciousness through personal engagement that will guide them in establishing meaningful relationships within an increasingly diverse workplace and larger society.

As James M. Lange, a professor of English and the author of *Life on the Tenure Track*, has noted, the digital generations are not slowing down enough to look at the world around them, or to think about how the choices they make affect the physical world in which they live. Writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, he argues—as do I—that even in a digital age, sitting with books or engaging in thoughtful discussions with a great teacher might be more valuable to students than learning experiences designed to mimic their technological habits.

William J. Price is a professor of educational leadership at Eastern Michigan University, in Ypsilanti, Mich.